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LETTER DATED 12 DECEMBER 1997 FROM THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ADDRESSED TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE SECURITY COUNCIL

In its resolution 1133 (1997) of 20 October 1997, the Security Council requested me to report every 60 days from the date of extension of the mandate of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) on the progress in the implementation of the settlement plan and the agreements reached between the parties. My report of 13 November 1997 (S/1997/882) set out in detail the preparatory work for the resumption of identification and other activities under the settlement plan and my recommendations for the full deployment of MINURSO. Since then there have been several important developments.

As members of the Council are aware, on 17 October my Acting Special Representative, Mr. Erik Jensen, met with the representative of the Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguía el-Hamra y del Río de Oro (Frente POLISARIO) to MINURSO, Mr. Emhamed Khaddad, in Tindouf and then with the Moroccan authorities to discuss various issues related to the implementation of the settlement plan. The Frente POLISARIO reaffirmed their commitment to the Houston agreement and their wish to see the process move forward expeditiously. On 20 and 22 October, Mr. Jensen met with the Minister of the Interior of Morocco, Mr. Driss Basri, who reiterated assurances of Morocco's commitment to the agreement (S/1997/742, annex III) and assured my Acting Special Representative of his Government's readiness to provide all practical support for the resumption of identification.

On 4 November, my Acting Special Representative presented to Mr. Emhamed Khaddad the provisional programme for identification and the proposed convocation list and discussed with him the updating of the list of the tribal leaders (sheikhs). On 5 and 6 November, Mr. Jensen discussed the same issues with the Minister of the Interior of Morocco. Further meetings with the parties have resolved all but two or three remaining differences in the list. On 14 November, both parties received on diskette complete lists of all persons remaining to be convoked with the request to provide details of changes of address and any other information pertinent to the determination of an appropriate identification centre. On 17 November, final convocation lists for the first four weeks of the resumed identification process were sent out and on

19 and 21 November, the remaining details of the initial programme were confirmed in writing, the start of the process being postponed briefly owing to administrative difficulties.

A series of practical measures were also taken to permit the resumption of identification at the beginning of December, as planned. After their arrival from Geneva, the identification files were organized in preparation for distribution to centres. With the cooperation of the parties, the first few centres due to become operational, in Laayoune and Smara in the Territory and in the Smara and Dakhla refugee camps near Tindouf, were restored. This includes the refurbishment and installation of the necessary specialized equipment.

Identification Commission staff started to arrive in the mission area during the month of November and a rigorous training programme has been under way, whereby staff members with the most experience trained and briefed their colleagues. The newly appointed Chairman of the Identification Commission, Mr. Robin Kinloch (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland), arrived in Laayoune on 23 November 1997; he has since met with the Secretary-General of the Frente POLISARIO, Mr. Mohamed Abdelaziz, and senior Frente POLISARIO officials and with the Minister of the Interior of Morocco, Mr. Driss Basri, as well as senior Moroccan officials.

The identification process resumed on 3 December 1997 as planned, at Laayoune and at Camp Smara in the Tindouf region. Two more identification centres were opened on 8 December, at Camp Dakhla in the Tindouf region and at Smara. A fifth centre, at Tan Tan in southern Morocco, is scheduled to open on 15 December. A second centre at Laayoune, originally expected to be opened on 15 December, will become operational on 22 December. Preparations for identification work in Mauritania are somewhat behind schedule and the process there is likely to resume in late January. The return of many former MINURSO staff has facilitated the start-up process, but the Commission is not yet at full strength, which it would be necessary to achieve in the next two weeks for the expansion to all nine centres in early January 1998. With the arrival of the new observers appointed by the Chairman of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), there are now six OAU observers in addition to the Senior Representative.

From 3 to 12 December 1997, over 3,000 persons were convoked and 2,386 identified. Both parties have supported the Commission's efforts in this process. The difficulties encountered have been mostly of a technical nature and have arisen in part because of the late return of updated data by the parties and in part because of the sequence of convocation. Another issue, in the Tindouf region, relates to the identification of applicants who have not been convoked but present themselves for identification; the Commission has established that there is no objection by either party to the identification of those who constitute exceptional (humanitarian) cases. In this regard, the Commission considers that, for reasons of principle and practice, identification should follow a single convocation to a specific centre. Steps are being taken to increase, where it has proved necessary, the number of applicants convoked every day in order to ensure the optimum use of centre resources. The Commission has decided to issue "operational communiqués", in order to announce its decision on procedures, as well as to provide advance notice of centre programmes and such matters as the movement of observers and tribal leaders,

deadlines for receipt of updated data and the issuance of convocation lists. The Chairman of the Identification Commission discussed this and other identification matters with the Minister of the Interior of Morocco and his senior advisers at their meeting in Laayoune on 9 December.

The re-establishment of the civilian police component of MINURSO is also under way. A five-person team from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police visited the mission area from 19 to 26 November to undertake reconnaissance and coordination related to the deployment of the Canadian civilian police contingent scheduled to arrive in December. Eight members of the Portuguese contingent arrived in Laayoune on 21 November and the newly appointed Civilian Police Commissioner, Chief Superintendent Peter Miller (Canada), arrived on 24 November. The civilian police component now comprises 48 officers. While the present contingent's strength is adequate to support the identification activities being phased in, the component is facing logistical problems arising from shortages in some equipment and supplies. Additional equipment to support the identification process is being shipped from other missions and should arrive in MINURSO by 14 December.

The military component of MINURSO continues to monitor the ceasefire between the Royal Moroccan Army and the Frente POLISARIO. The situation in the mission area remains stable, with no significant indications that either side intends to resume hostilities. In the meantime, the Secretariat has initiated intensive consultations with potential troop-contributing countries to identify the necessary military units for MINURSO.

The strenuous effort that has been made to ensure the successful resumption of the identification process and the renewed expression by both parties of their commitment to full implementation of the settlement plan encourages me to believe that MINURSO will be able to complete its tasks in accordance with the challenging timetable presented in my recent report to the Security Council (S/1997/882) and the relevant decisions of the Council. However, for this to happen, all elements of the timetable must be strictly adhered to, including the provision of the necessary resources in full and on time. This applies, in particular, to the deployment of the engineering and other resources by the first half of February, at the latest, as indicated in the timetable, to undertake the operational demining and prepare for the deployment of the military component of the Mission. I trust that the Security Council and the General Assembly would do everything possible to assist in meeting these challenging tasks.

(Signed) Kofi A. ANNAN